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THE PRASNOTTARA

(HINDU QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON TOPICS OF INTEREST TO THEOSOPHISTS)

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Any Member can send questions, answers to questions, opinions and notes upon Theosophical subjects, or matters relating to Hindu Religion, Philosophy and Customs, and is requested to do so. When necessary, communications will be condensed by the Editor.

Write on one side of the paper only and address all communications to the Editor—**RASTHAN KRISHNAN, Gen. Sec., Adyar, Madras.**

For paragraphs under the word "Ans." the Editor is personally responsible.
January, 1931.

QUESTION I.

In what precise way is "Meditation" to be practised by a Theosophist?

Ans.—Very few, even among earnest Theosophists, possess that power of concentrating the mind *exclusively* upon one subject, which is the indispensable pre-requisite to the practice of "Meditation" in its technical sense. For "Meditation" implies the intense absorption of all one's mental powers in the effort to understand and grasp in its innermost nature the subject, whatever it may be, upon which one has resolved to "Meditate." So, that before taking up the subject of "Meditation" itself, I desire to invite communications, from all who have any knowledge, whether theoretical or practical, of the subject, upon the following question—

"What is the best method to pursue in order so to bring the mind under control that the attention can be kept fixed upon a given subject without wandering."

QUESTION II.

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If every one starts from and returns into "That" (Spirit) what is the object of existence in matter?

A. N. S.—I think this question may receive some light from an examination of what takes place in one earth life of an individual man. The ego being the same in the new born babe and the advanced old man, the mental consciousness is yet quite different in the two. The ego, though functioning on a higher plane in the babe, has but a vague glimmer of consciousness as regards physical surroundings. But the ego in the advanced old man, has become a centre around which crowds of mental pictures, drawn rightly or wrongly during the life time of the individual, gather in a vast array. The fruit of that one life experience of the ego may therefore be summed up by saying that the consciousness representable by an abstract "I am" in the babe, has been transformed into the complex and many-sided picture of a whole life-experience, be it physical or anything else, in the old man.

Transferring this analogy from an individual unit to the Cosmos, we can conceive an abstract spiritual power, essence or light, caught into a close embrace with matter and made to dance along with her, fast or slow in endless circles, until, when the thrill subsides, the spirit gets released from the embrace and returns with, or rather is itself the experience of the dance. This is the symbol of Nataraja in Chidambaram, or the king of dancers in the sky or region of consciousness. The legend has it that Nataraja is the dancer, Vishnu, or the Logos, is the singer and Gouri, or the principle of spiritual wisdom, is the spectator and enjoyer.

This idea of the drama of life appears to me to be very important since it throws light upon the question proposed. Nata-

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NOTICE.

The following short index has been drawn up for the benefit of readers of the PRASNOTTARA. The pages of numbers 2 and 3 were, unfortunately, not numbered consecutively. It has been thought better, however, to arrange the index as if this had been so. As there are 16 pages to each number of the PRASNOTTARA, it will be easy for readers to find references occurring in these two numbers. The remaining numbers are paged consecutively.

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raja is the spiritual essence that emanates from the Absolute, is made to work in a Maha Maya or cosmic evolution, and returns back to the plane of the Absolute as a worked up spiritual efflorescence of the cosmic evolution, or a new logos in addition to the innumerable logoi already in existence. This idea of a new logos requires some explanation.

We see that we cannot think of a unit without thinking of the whole. The various characters of the units of our Theosophical Society become, in the synthesis, the character of the Society. Instead of considering the logoi or logos, already existing, as sending out feeders into the strata of cosmic Maya and assimilating the spiritual efflorescence of the process, as Mr. Subba Row considered, I think it will be more reasonable to state that as men proceed, evolving on more and more spiritual planes, all their individual natures become more and more connected, until in the end of a distinct logos—a synthesis of cosmic evolution—becomes established in the bosom of Parabramham. I think this view is sanctioned by the allegory of the dance referred to above. Vishnu is the singer, and Vishnu, as explained by Mr. Subba Row, is the already existing logos. It is Vishnu who by his thrilling song guides the evolution of the cosmos in harmonious order. He also takes care of struggling humanity in great crises. If it be asked why he does so, the answer is plain. He does so because obedience to the law is his very being.

When, therefore, Sri Krishna says in Baghavat Gita that he is the goal of all evolution, I think he only means his condition as logos. To sum up, the object of evolution of spirit in matter is that the logoi aspect of Parabramham may be enriched by the addition of new logoi.

C.N.S.—When it emerges from *That* it is in a state of passive perfection, and when it return to *That* it is in a state of active perfection. It has enriched itself with the life-experiences of so many existences. In the beginning it was colourless, and in the end it is golden coloured. There is the same difference

between the two states, as between one whose virtue is passive, being untried by any temptations; and one who has struggled and fought hard with temptations of every sort, and has come out victorious and perfect.

A. S. R.—Spirit being itself consciousness, cannot be conscious of itself. To attain self-consciousness it has to involve itself in matter and then evolve out of it.

QUESTION III.

How can great disasters, such as great railway accidents, floods, famines and so on, in which thousands of persons perish, be interpreted from the point of view of Karma?

A. N. S.—This is a question of collective Karma. We see by observation that persons of similar natures are drawn together by sympathy. In every great town, we can see that separate functions such as learning, manufacture, distribution, government, &c., are played by distinct groups of men, each group presenting a distinct individuality good or bad. This gathering together of men of kindred natures is accounted for by the fact that union is found to be strength. It is but reasonable to suppose that the sympathy generated between the units of these gatherings works even after death, and is instrumental in bringing these men together again on the scene of life to gather fresh experience. The people, thus re-born, are driven by karmic power, to embrace such pursuits as are most in affinity with their past Karma. They gather again in communities and work on.

If the above is the way in which men are drawn together by affinity, it follows, as a matter of course, that strong psychic currents of definite natures are set in vibration by various communities of men, tending to disturb the harmony of nature, a harmony that requires all the units of the human community to feel as brothers, and work as such to ameliorate one another's material and spiritual condition. When the disturbance is so great that the law of harmony is forced to assert itself, then

punishment in the form of famine, flood, &c., is the fate that befalls the group or groups of men who acted as the centre of emanation of these disturbing psychic currents.

The puzzling point in this explanation is that good men, who do not deserve the fate of their evil brethren, still fall victims. But it must be remembered that Nature has no courts of law, in which each unit of her existence may be judged according to merit and demerit, without a failure to be mended. There is and must be a chapter of accidents in the history of nature's work, since she directs her energy along a broad current at first and then along branches and branchlets, to mete out the dues of humanity. But the very existence of the law of harmony in nature, adjusting effects to causes, must convince us that good men who die undeserved deaths have not been cheated out of their dues. The unpaid balance, for good or ill, is of course carried to subsequent incarnations, with due allowance for the physical suffering that was undeservedly inflicted.

An objection may be raised to the above in that it does not give a very high idea of natural wisdom and justice to err at first and mend the error subsequently. To this I can only answer by pointing out that wisdom and justice are only identical with "error being mended." The universe is only an eternal erring and readjustment.

K. N. I.—It is clear, from the fact of the accident, that those who fell victims to it must have participated in their previous lives in some cause which now manifests itself, *e.g.* by committing a crime, viz. murder, the karma of which now justly meets them in the form of proper punishment, death. Of course from their meeting with death now it is plain they must have, at some time, killed other persons unjustly, as in a battle or otherwise. The persons whom they killed then could not have felt any intense desire to wreak vengeance on their slayers; else the former would be the agents now to kill the latter in return. It remains to find an explanation of the place and time of the accident. As regards time it is, I think, due to func-

tion of the planets that are required to bring about this event. As regards the place, if it is the same place all is clear. But if it is a different place, then it can be accounted for on the ground that it is the place which received the influence from the planet or planets determining the accident. The circumstance of a person's being killed now by fire, water, &c., depends also upon the instrument be used before, in committing the crime whose consequence he now reaps.

Ans.—While agreeing with both the above writers as to the general outline of the replies they give, there are several points raised by the second writer which certainly require further elucidation. They are :—(1). The assumption that because a man dies a violent death in one life, therefore he must have taken life by violence in a previous one. Cannot the karma of murder work itself out otherwise than by a violent death? Or more generally (for if the law holds good of murder, it must do so also in other cases) is it true that the Law of Karma always operates by inflicting upon the doer, the deed he has done? If so, karmic action should be less mysterious than it seems to most people at present. (2). The assumed connection between the instrument used to commit the crime and mode of retribution requires proof, or rather full explanation. (3). The explanation of time and place as due to planetary influence, is true from the standpoint of *occult* astrology. But I fail to see how we are to trace out the chain of causation—even in theoretical outline—between the creation of causes at one time and place and the manifestations of those causes at a different place. Further explanation is at least desirable on these points.

QUESTION IV.

What is the true rationale of the Hindu caste-system?

X.—The “true rationale” is so very interwoven with the “origin” of caste, that in answering the one I also answer the other. Unfortunately the question is such that any statement, unless supported by the ancient writings, will not do. To put the whole thing briefly :—

In the beginning there was no such thing as caste. The Rishis of the Vedic times belonged to no caste. There is not a single passage, strictly speaking, in the whole of the Rig Veda to show that the Indo-Aryan community was divided into four castes. The theory broached in the Rig Veda X. 129, that the "Brahmins sprung from the face of Brahma; the Kshatriyas from the arms; the Vaisyas from the thighs; and the Sudras from the feet" is only symbolical and signifies, at best, the different parts of the body which are powerful in each of the four castes and refers to their respective duties. Moreover, the context of the hymn in question (*Purusha Sukta*), and its different parts clearly show that the whole description of the Cosmos therein given is only symbolical, and cannot therefore be taken literally.

Again the hymn being a prayer to the Deity cannot, with any appropriateness, be said to enumerate the four Indian castes; and lastly, I may add that it is the opinion of several Vedic scholars, that this hymn was added to the Rig Veda, a long time after the composition of the other hymns in it. By implying that the hymns were not all composed by Brahma, and given out by Him at one and the same time as is generally supposed, I entirely follow the conclusion arrived at by Jaimini in his *Purvamimamsa Sutras* (*Apaurusheyatvādhikarana*); besides being based on internal evidence furnished by the Rig Veda itself. Of course, the terms *varna*, *kshatriya*, *vipra* and *Brahmana* appear in the Rig Veda. *Varna* is a term used to distinguish Aryans from non-Aryans, and is no where used to distinguish the different classes of the Aryans themselves from one another as is the case now-a-days. *Kshatriya* is therein used to mean strong, and *Vipra* wise; and both these terms are applied to the Gods. The word *Brahmana* which, in later times, meant a *vipra* or a Brahmin, originally meant a composer of hymns, and later on one who presided at the sacrifice. For further particulars I need only refer the reader to Yaska's *Nighantū*, and the commentaries thereon. Here I may quote

for reference a pathetic hymn from the IXth Mandala which will silence the advocates of the hereditary caste system :—
 “ Behold I am a composer of hymns (Rishi used in literal sense), my father is a physician, my mother grinds corn on stone. We are all engaged in different occupations. As cows wander (in various directions) in the pasture fields (for food), so we (in various occupations), worship thee, O Soma! for wealth. Flow thou for Indra” (IX. 112.3).

In the Aitareya and other Brahmanas, the Brihadaranyaka, and Chhandogya Upanishads—not to mention the Vajrasuchikopanishad which is not among the genuine ones—instances are to be found in which men of the lowest “castes” raised themselves to the “Brahmin caste” solely by their tapas (austerities). In the Aitareya Brahmana we are told that the descendants of a Kshatriya or Vaisya, for instance, might enter another caste by simply following the profession of the latter, and the Sathapatha Brahmana authoritatively says that a Brahmin becomes so by his knowledge and not by his birth. In the later Vedic times, as may be seen from Taittiriya Aranyaka and the sixteenth chapter of the White Yajur Veda, there was a large number of professions followed by the Aryans, but they had nothing to do with caste.

The Vayu Purana, and the Moksha Dharma of the Mahabharata distinctly say that at first there was only one caste, called in the various writings, Visas, Brahmins, Aryans, and Hamsa; in other words, it means that there was originally no caste among the Aryans themselves.

Throughout the Mahabharata, one may find that it was the merit, or tapas of an individual that entitled him to be classed in the higher castes, and not mere birth; also that if a Brahmin neglected his duties he might be degraded to the lower castes (*Vanaparva* 180, v. 21—37; 181, v. 23, 25, 35; 216, v. 14 and 15; 313, v. 107—109: *Bhishma Parva* Bhagavadgita 18, v. 37: *Santiparva* 188, 189). In the Parva last mentioned, it is clearly said all were originally Brahmins. Those that practised

devotion, and austerities because Brahmins; those that were passionate and quarrelsome were called Kshatriyas; and those that took to agriculture and commerce were called (or became) Vaisyas, and those that were quite useless and therefore did any kind of menial service, became Sudras. Thus castes were originally created by virtue of professions chosen, or in other words "division of labour."

The motives given in the various Puranas that Brahma created the four castes from the different parts of his body is only an adoption *en bloc* of the symbolic language used in the Rig Veda X. 129; and cannot therefore be interpreted literally.

A. N. S.—If there is one thing above all others, that has made the Hindus an object of contempt and misrepresentation by the European Padris, it is this division of the race into castes. The question has been looked at by them from the standpoint of belief in a personal God, and therefore as involving the question as to who was entitled to the favor of that personal God and who was not. But the Hindus, at least the ancients, did not believe in the existence of a personal God dispensing favors according to his own arbitrary will; and therefore the explanation of their caste-system lies deeper.

The Hindus, as is well proved from a study of their philosophy, believed in 3 gunas: Satwa, Rajas, Tamas, or three ways in which the cosmic Maya or Prakriti can manifest itself. This triple mode of manifestation was recognised in every object: taking the case of man, the 3 gunas correspond to his spiritual, psychical and physical nature. The original classification of men seems to have been into 3, Deva, Man, Rakshasa according as his spiritual, psychic or physical nature predominated. A later classification, and even this was a very ancient one, divided men into 4 classes: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras, according as the spiritual, spirituo-psychical, psychico-physical or purely physical nature preponderated. According to this idea, a Brahmin is one whose delight would consist in abstracting his existence from the realm of Maya or

manifestation, in his trying to occupy the plane of being which may be called the heart of the universe. A Kshatriya is one who is actuated by high ideals of *action*, and delights in trying to improve the spiritual and material welfare of men according to his ideal. A Vaisya is one who is actuated by the low selfish motives of desire for lucre, personal comforts, &c. A Sudra is one who is too dull even for this, and is fit only for menial services.

We thus see that the division of the castes is based on the division of man's own complex nature, which in its turn follows the division of the whole of nature, as may be seen from the following table:—

Satwa	Rajas	Tamas	class.
Deva	man	Rakshasa	human being.
Hamsa	eagle	crow	birds.
Aswatha	palmyra	poppy	trees.
Crystal	precious stone	granite	mineral.
Deer	horse	ass	quadruped.

This may be followed up throughout all nature. The caste-system of the Hindus does not at all mean that each class has its own prerogative in nature. Viewed from the spiritual standpoint, all men are manifestations of one and the same spiritual principle. Sri Krishna even taught that they alone are wise who viewed, in the same light, the learned Brahmin, the cow, the elephant, the dog and a dog-eating man.

This explanation of the caste-system throws light on the ordinary Hindu saying that a Brahmin alone would reach Moksha and that other caste men must be born as Brahmins before they attain it. True. How can the slave of low desires attain that tranquillity of mind symbolized by a "smiling lily in the still lagoons." There is a prohibition against Sudras reading the Vedas. True. How can the mystic powers of mantras be given over to men of desire? Christ too taught that pearls cannot be thrown before swine. There is a prohibition against

Brahmins drinking wine. True. Drinking will rouse *psyche* and ruffle the heavenly calm of his soul, his birthright.

It must be borne in mind, in this connection, that each man of a higher status was bound to help his lower brethren as Sri Krishna did. He said "I am lord of the 3 lokas and there is nothing to be wished for, for my own sake. But I work for the good of humanity and you too work so, O! Son of Kunti."

It will not be out of place to note here that, even in countries where there is no caste division, men fall into 4 divisions in virtue of natural law. We can divide the English people into 4 classes—(1) the literary and metaphysical, (2) political, (3) commercial and manufacturing, (4) the servile or the masses.

As time rolled on, as the heart of mother India began to beat more intensely on the side of Maya than on the side of spirit; as man began to forget more and more that he is a ray of the infinite spirit; as he began to record as a foolery, the common saying of old women in India that a star falls from heaven when a man is born; so things of the form obtained greater importance than things of the spirit, and as a result, *ahankara* or the spirit of separateness became the guiding star of India's destinies. No longer could a Brahmin be satisfied in the idea than an offspring of his flesh and blood could be otherwise than a Brahmin. Caste prejudice began and continues till now, even though the fact is glaring that many a Sudra is a Brahmin in spirit and *vice versa*.

K. N. I.—The caste system is based upon the doctrine of Spiritual Heredity, and it also holds good from the physical standpoint of division of labor and economy or utility. Unlike the modern doctrine of heredity, which regards the physical body as of little importance, the Hindu legislators of old paid more attention to mental heredity and, studying nature, found that the mind of man was born in a family having the same tendency as itself. They therefore divided the race into 4 principal divisions following different avocations such as spirituality, war, trade, and agriculture.

Now when a man is born in a family of his own proclivities and when that family has been for a series of generations developing in one special field he begins with a good start or impetus in that field. His parents being of that tendency put him in the way from his very boyhood. All his associations, such as neighbours, things near, &c., tend to remind him of that one field. Here I would state that each class of persons in India reside in its own precincts, undisturbed by others, though of late that custom is deviated from in large towns. In consequence instruments, books, &c., are easily obtainable in the family itself as also easy access to information. Thus our forefathers created many specialists in each field who worked in it from their earliest years, like the specialists in philosophy, science, &c., of modern days; the different being that the modern system lacks good specialists both in number and quality as well as *race* specialists as in the Hindu system. By *race* specialists I mean those who propagate issue having the same tendencies as the father. Thus we find that caste system, both on account of heredity and utility, is good.

It is not, however, to be supposed that there will be no love or unanimity of feeling between the castes. On account of division of labor, each has to depend upon the others for its food physical, mental or other which others may give. For instance, when spirituality was wanted all the others would apply to the Brahmins for help, and so on.

But so long as each caste followed its own calling truly without trespassing upon the duties of others, so long did the system work well. Thus we find in the Puranas that in the beginning of this Vaivaswata Manvantara, when humanity increased, those having Brahmagnyana were termed Brahmins, those versed in war were termed Kshatriyas, and so on. But when once the duties of each were not performed properly there arose all kinds of anomalies: such as Thiruvalluvar, a Tamil adept, and other gnyanees being born in the *chandala* or the lowest caste. In illustration of this I would quote from the Ramayana,

from Uttarakanda, an event which shows that each caste performed its own duties and that when one infringed them the general law was disturbed. A Brahmin having lost his son at a premature age and not being able to trace to himself or the boy any sin as cause for such a premature death (as all were pure at that period and died at an advanced age) laid the charge of his son's death at the king's door, on account of his misrule; whereupon the king made enquiries and found that a Sudra was making Tapas; which having been stopped the dead son revived. Finally, even in these degenerate days of the caste system, we find that the Brahmins who are keeping intact their customs, though not others, are far ahead of other castes in spirituality and intelligence.

C. R. S.—According to the Gita, caste is based upon Guna (qualities) and Karma. Those persons who, by their previous exceptionally good karma, were endowed with great spiritual qualities were taken into the Brahmin caste. These were mostly the disciples of the great Rishis, as the names of their Gotras will testify. Their descendants will naturally inherit that fine spiritual constitution which enables one to have a pure life; and the various rules for the daily guidance of a Brahmin's life fostered the spirituality. So it is that the Brahmins were regarded as the highest (spiritually) of all the people.

Others in whom the Rajasa element predominated and who could not devote their entire time to their spiritual self-development, were entrusted with the task of protecting the Brahmins and others engaged in religious duties (thus also reaping good karma as furthering the spiritual progress of the Brahmins). These were the Kshatriyas.

Others in whom the worldly and Tamasic elements preponderated were left to follow the worldly concerns, such as trade, arts, &c., and so indirectly conduced to the welfare of Society and the Brahmins. They had also some spiritual training, as is shown by ceremonies being performed for them by the Brahmins. But it should be observed that the last two classes are to

protect and supply the wants of the Brahmins in every respect, thus leaving them free to work for themselves and mankind ; and this they did.

Again those who were intellectually and spiritually unfit to associate with the above three classes, were relegated as Sudras and were to serve the others. But if any one was, through bad karma, born in any of the 3 last classes, but might through his other good karma improve spiritually, he had free admission and promotion into the higher classes as proved by many examples in the Puranas. So any one born in the higher classes by his karma, but devoid of any spiritual instincts, was mercilessly dismissed to the lower orders. So in the beginning caste was based on *spirituality and karma*.

QUESTION V.

Why can a metal vessel which has been touched by a man of lower caste be used by a Brahmin after it has been purified by fire, while an earthen or glass vessel cannot be purified, but must be broken and thrown away?

R. J.—With the stupid idea of his superiority over other castes, the Brahmin carries his, now-a-days, supposed sacredness to extremes. The earthen vessel also can be purified like the other one. Considering the cheapness of the article, he takes back the metal vessel purified by fire, and the earthen vessel he throws away, as it can be procured for a very trifling value. A certain custom observed by some Brahmins justifies my argument. Those Brahmins who use earthen vessels for cooking change them for new ones once a fortnight (new moon), and if they cannot do so through some cause or other, they purify these earthen vessel by fire and use them again. This custom still prevails in most parts of India among the Brahmins who use earthen vessels for cooking.

Ans.—We must not be unjust—even to Brahmins—and the fact that a Brahmin throws away an earthen pot if rendered

impure, while using a metal one after purifying it by fire, has a reason more scientific than pride.

Different substances have very different powers of absorbing and retaining magnetism. From some things magnetism may be removed by washing in water, from nearly all by the action of fire assisted by certain sound-vibrations (*mantrams*). Still there are exceptions to this rule, and glass, earthenware and similar substances are the most common. No amount of passing through by fire, even to melting and recasting, with or without mantrams, avails to really remove from *glass* magnetism which it has once absorbed, and the same thing is true, though in a somewhat less degree, of earthenware.

C.R.S.—Fire is a more efficacious in removing magnetism from many articles than water; but articles are better magnetic conductors than others and more easily accusable to the purifying influences of fire. Metals are among these; as even among them some are preferred. I shall mention them in the order of purity and as also the substances with which they are purified.

1.	Gold	...	...	Solution of sugar and water
2.	Silver	...	...	lime juice
3.	Copper	...	...	tamarind
4.	Brass	...	...	do.
5.	Bronze	...	...	do.
6.	Earthenware	...	...	should be broken
7.	Glass	...	...	do. do.

Vessels 3 and 4 when used for some ceremonial purpose are smeared with *ghee* and passed over the fire. But brass vessels are never used for any religious purposes. When they are polluted by a woman in her courses, or by a person of the lower orders, they are to be purified at the forge. I need not say that iron and lead vessels are of no use for religious purposes.

NOTICE.

The following questions, among others, have been proposed for consideration in the next number of the *Prasnotara*. Members willing to share in the work are requested to send in answers, at latest, on or before February 15th :—

1.—*What is the best method to pursue in order so to bring the mind under control that the attention can be fixed upon a given subject without wandering?*

2. *What is the symbolical meaning of caste-marks?*

3. *What is the object of fasting at night on the New, Full-moon and Ekadasi days? Also what is the object of fasting in general?*

4. *What may the Shastras mean by saying that Yagna, or the sacrificial ceremony, will produce rain?*

5. *Is the ascetic life obligatory or essential for all men?*

6. *Is belief in elementals a superstition? If not, are they self-conscious? Are they intelligent and if so, what is the character of their intelligence. How are they defined and described in the Shastras?*

7. *What determines the length of time between the successive incarnations of the same Individuality or Jiva, and does it bear any relation to the length of earth life?*

8. *What class of karma determines whether a Jiva shall be born in a male or a female body?*

9. *In the Puranas it is said that Rishis cursed persons to become beasts, stones, &c., for some definite time. This appears contrary to the law of evolution. How can it be explained.*

10. *If one remains in this world as long as that portion of his karma lasts, which requires to be worked out here, and then dies, is this also the reason for the alternation of waking and dreaming states in man's daily life? If so, what principles regulate them?*